

WOMEN IN MODERN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN BENGALI

-TAPATI CHOWDHURIE

The characterisation of women in modern literature for children in the Bengali language has to be carefully examined, in order to throw adequate light on the present day scenario.

A woman has certain characteristics which make her very different from her male counterpart. Because of her inherent inferiority in physical strength in comparison to her male partner, she has always been exploited. However, the woman of the modern world is more aware than ever of her need to remove all obstacles towards maintaining her distinct identity. She has certain rights which should be hers. According to the laws of the universe, men and women will rotate in their own orbits till eternity, and no power on earth should stop the woman from playing her role. Indeed both men and women should co-exist happily without exploiting or trampling on the wishes of the other. Only then can both take the world forward towards becoming better civilized.

Literature for children aims at serving them with not only what will help them to be appreciative of the world, but that which will inculcate in them a system of values. The mind of a child is

receptive and therefore anything and everything makes an impression on him. Literature produced should cater to all his needs, because the children of today are the adults of tomorrow, who have to face the practical world.

We assume that children do not distinguish between men and women, and to them all are persons irrespective of their sex. So literature that caters to children should portray healthy human beings both in body and mind, no matter to what sex they belong.

With this realization, writers of children's literature have the responsibility of creating proper attitudes towards both men and women. Writers should not follow the attitudes of their predecessors in presenting a female character in the traditional role of a being whose existence is to be seen and appreciated only within the four walls of her home—as merely an object of beauty, desire, grace, softness etc. Traditionally, she is never a protagonist, but at best plays a supporting role. A child should not be made to believe that a woman lives only for others and that individually she is a nonentity. If writers by the might of their pen can bring in a revolution in society's attitudes towards the emotional needs of the girl child and the woman, then they would have done a great service to mankind.

Now let us examine the types of women characters that are commonly drawn today by writers in Bengali literature for children.

Superstitious and timid characters

There exists a world of difference between rural and urban India and this is reflected in children's literature too. Mahasweta Debi develops the character of a typical village woman in her story titled *Armani Chapar Gach*. In this book, Mato's mother is a poor village woman with vague ideas of what is wrong and right. Her need to live overpowers all other feelings. She is timid, docile and afraid of all sorts of things, real or imaginary. She is superstitious and afraid of

the village deities. Because of this, she is exploited and burdened. When the village *kapalik* who has been slighted by her son, hatches a cunning plan to book him and orders the offering of Mato's goat to propitiate the Gods in order to rid the village of its deadly sins, Mato's mother has blind faith in the *kapalik* and is loyal to him rather than to her own son. Lila Majumdar weaves another story in a village setting that goes back perhaps 150 years. The story is based on ancient folklore with vivid imagination and is rooted to the soil. It tells of the simple joys and sorrows of common folk. A father character in this story makes a lot of money by marrying two of his elder daughters to old men by taking large sums of money. He plans to do the same thing with the third one though the two elder sisters have been widowed and are expected by society to lead austere lives. This story of Kankabati's exploits is wishful. It reveals the superstitious society of the village folk and their faith in gods, ghosts and witch doctors. When a woman finds herself helpless and cannot fight against society, she wishes irrational elements to help her way through. In a collection of stories, Swapon Buro writes *Satadala basinir Abhisapta satnari* (cursed women dwellers of the lotus land) which is about superstitions, witches and all the usual elements. This is exactly what happens in life, and in all these cases literature produced is true to life, but the writers are not transcending their role of portraying art directly from life. They do not provide any role model.

Evil and petty

More often than not, writers for children have in their stories women who are evil and petty and generally are black characters. In *Galpa ar galpa*, a collection of stories, *Sundari* is the usual story of three sisters, two of whom are jealous of the third and lucky one. The story of Lakshmi in the same collection also portrays the traditional theme of a good and bad girl. The evil character in many

stories is usually a woman. In *Bale gachen Ram sanna* by Mustafi Siraj, the evil character in one of the stories is the statue of a woman who comes alive at the dead of night. She is the villain of the story viz. a cold blooded sucker of human blood. In fairy tales such as *Galper Jhuli*, a collection of fairy tales, the evil characters are mostly women—witches and their kind, who bring evil to mankind and have to be subdued and annihilated. The portrayal of women as petty, jealous, blood-thirsty, greedy and the like is quite frequently resorted to by writers.

The role of a mother and a protector

Writers are easily able to identify women in the role of a mother, because this is one of the most important aspects of a woman. *Gach Ma* is a book designed for children who have just learnt to recognize the letters. Here a tree is visualized as the provider, and naturally the provider is none other than the mother figure—one who protects. In the story *Amar Ma*, a little girl tells the story of her admiration for her mother. There is no falsity in the deep love of the child. The mother has everything that she admires. No other traits of an individual in her own right are attributed to this persona.

Detective and mystery stories

Solving mysteries is a favourite with children. In most of these stories the detective is always a male. Of course, there are a few writers such as Dhurjoti Prasad and Nalini Das whose detectives are women. This is quite a diversion from the general run. Phulmasi in *Phulmasir Goenda Giri* is a daring woman detective. In the adventures of *Goenda Gandalu* by Nalini Das the four detectives are Bulu, Kalu, Malu, and Tulu. The word *Ganda* means four and since all four names of the detectives end with the sound 'lu', the four names of the girls are together called Gandalu. In *Kella Rahasya* by Santipriya Bandopadhyay, the mystery solvers are a mixed group of both boys and

girls. So also in *Kakahigarh Abhijan* by Sastipada Chattopadhyay, the duo detectives are a boy and a girl. In *Pandav Goenda*, Sastipada Chattopadhyay's detectives are a mixed group—three boys and two girls. Manjul Sen has the well developed character of a young girl called Kajal in his detective story, *Chitar Thaba*. Kajal finds herself in the position of an assistant to the detective by sheer circumstance. With her help the detective called Prasant outwits the culprits. In *Bideshi Garithe Bipad* by Samaresh Basu, a girl, Jhumki, and a boy Gogol, work together to solve the mystery. The detective in *Manhatane Manhunt* is 'Bentu Mashi' (aunt Bentu).

Though the above writers have women playing the role of detectives in their stories, one must not be led to think that a major breakthrough has been made in this field and there are in Bengali literature as many women detectives as there are males. One must keep in mind that a large number of mystery stories are turned out because children enjoy reading them the most. So writers who have used women as detectives are only a drop in the ocean. The most popular writers of detective stories for children in the Bengali language are Satyajit Ray and Sunil Gangopadhyay, and they are conspicuous for not using women as detectives in their stories.

Adventure stories

Very few authors in the past could think of a woman being the centre of a daring adventure. So when one reads about the daring exploits of Bachendri Pal in scaling Mount Everest in a poem one cannot but see a new dawn. In *Banglar Ek Begum*, Dharendra Lal Dhar writes about the brave exploits of a queen who lived in the 15th century and who killed the slayer of her husband, King Jalauddin-Fateh-Shah, in order to take revenge. Here is another example of a brave and daring exploit of a woman that has found its place in literature. In a moving story, *Ma Ek Nirvik Sainik*, the author develops the character of a very

strong woman. The character of Anaturu who lived with her husband in her cart house is developed with care. Anaturu's husband who was once the greatest favourite of the king falls out of his grace and has to pay for it with his life. With the death of Stan starts the story of Anaturu, the mother of his new born baby boy Kohen. It is her tale of how she is able to turn one from the path of violence to the path of love—a typical role invariably highlighting those virtues which are identified with acceptable femininity. In *Ekti Meye Eka* Katrick Ghose writes about the bold spirit of the village girl whose sympathies are for the down-trodden and who protests boldly against the injustice done to them. The writer has been very bold indeed.

Brave and Constructive

In *Arun Barun Kironmala* and *Mitul Naamey Putulti*, the author builds his women characters to stress that a mother very efficiently builds and does not destroy. This is a subtle way of exploiting women to shoulder all responsibilities of caring and building alone, and leaves her male counterpart more or less free. That is perhaps why women are generally found to be more caring than men.

Equality

Very few authors of children's literature have ventured to bridge the gap that exists in society between men and women. Though the world has taken great strides in realizing the need to change attitudes towards the development of the girl child as a total human being, authors of children's literature in Bengali have contributed precious little to this noble aim. In this context, it is heartening to note that a competition was held jointly by Children's Book Trust and UNICEF on the topic, "Boys and girls are equal". The prize winning story is the story of how a boy and a girl jointly save a tree from being hacked.

A total human being

In *Khukumani's Chara* Kalyani Karlekar writes about all that Khukumani wishes to be, in keeping with the urban social situation of today. She is game for learning how to wrestle as well as learning karate for her protection, besides being able to ride all kinds of vehicles. She wishes to be an astronaut. She not only makes these wishes for herself but for everybody else. More and more writers should follow her bold path. This is again just a drop in the ocean.

Human endeavour where sex is no barrier

In Bengali literature this modern trend is noticed in the story of Santipriyo Bandopadhyay. This is the story of a dedicated coach who trains a girl to be an athlete of international standards trying to overcome all obstacles and barriers. The fact that talent has been spotted and due attention is given needs encouragement. *Tumpa Namaya Meyati* is the story of a girl whose father wishes her to be an animal trainer in the circus—an unusual field to choose for a girl. The book is about Tumpa's adventure with a lion, 'Ghayayo' and a monkey called 'Huppa'. Tumpa speaks to them in animal language. *Ora Kara* is the story of two female scientists and a Bengali school boy. The story is based on scientific research and will rouse young minds to have a thirst for finding out the unknown. In the story of *Madhuma* by Sushama Sen published in Naba Patrika, the author writes about a woman painter who drowns her sorrows by painting. Just when one of her paintings wins a prize all her paintings are burnt by her aunt, because she was not attentive to her nephew who was under her care and who fell and injured himself. She ends her life and does not live to see her success. This is indeed an eye opener for recognizing individual talent in a person irrespective of sex.

History

Several authors of children's literature have

written about brave women in history. In *Mandur Roopmati*, the author weaves a romantic tale around Baz Bahadur and Roopmati. These characters have been taken from history. The literary scene as far as historical characters is concerned is dismal. There is a lot of scope for writers to tread newer paths, if they have to meet the changing needs of the time. History has to be seen from a new angle and a fresh interpretation must be made.

Topical issues

Samaresh Majumdar in his book *Sitaharan Rahasya* has dealt with a topical issue. The story is all about punks. The birth place of punks like the hippies, is the U.S.A. Punks are youngsters who live in groups in ill-famed lanes and by-lanes, in ugly, frightful surroundings, robbing and taking intoxicants while engaged in all kinds of anti-social activities. They defy values that are cherished by society. Sita is a Bengali girl who joins one such group and the story deals with how her parents try to save her. The problem is very real for a section of society. Punks never spare deserters and so she is twice abducted, but the clever detectives, Amal and Arjun manage to rescue her.

Both men and women have been writing for children. More than ever, they have to be aware of the task in hand. Among the more famous women authors who have been writing for children, the names that come to my mind are Lila Majumdar, Nalini Das, Ashapurna Devi, Mahasweta Debi, Meera Balasubramaniam and Gouri Dharmapal besides numerous others. Being women themselves, they have a duty in changing the traditional concept of how women should be seen. Dickensian, flat and typified, accepted, feminine roles should be avoided. Regardless of what roles the protagonist plays in life, she can still be a woman. If women writers don't project this, it is difficult to see how they can help the coming generations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Armani Chapar Gach*, Mahasweta Debi, Punascha, 9A Nabin Kundu Lane, Calcutta-9, 1992.
- Chotoder Srestha Galpa*, Lila Majumdar, Nandita Publishers, 6A Shyamacharan Dey St., Calcutta-73, 1992.
- Galpa Ar Galpa*, Sukholata Rao, Mitra and Ghosh Publisher Pvt. Ltd., 10, Shyamacharan Dey St., Calcutta-73, 1992.
- Nanan Desher Roopkatha*, Sukholata Rao, Mitra & Ghosh Publisher Pvt. Ltd., 10, Shyamacharan Dey St., Calcutta-73, 8th edition 1993.
- Gach Ma*, Narayan Sanyal, C. Bhattacharya Indian Progressive Publishers Co. Pvt. Ltd., Rajendra Deb Rd., Calcutta-7, 1992.
- My Mother — Amar Ma*, Sigrun Srivastava, Translator Swapna Dutta, CBT, New Delhi.
- Kritagya Amagach*, Rupa Gupta, Translator Lakshmi Ghosh, 1985 prize winning story in a competition jointly held by CBT and UNICEF.
- Galper Jhuli*, Preeti Pal Chowdhury, Kalyanbrata Dutt, Tuli Kalam, 1 A, College Row, 1992.
- Sera Sanchayan Festival number*, Tuli Kalam, 1991.
- Mark Nirvik Sainik*, Sailen Ghose, Ananda Publisher, 1992.
- Sishu Pathya Ganthabali*, Jogindranath Sarkar, Saiba Prakashani Vibhag, 86/1, Mahatma Gandhi Road, 1993.
- Sitaharen Rahasya*, Samaresh Majumdar, Ananda Publishers, 1988.
- Bideshi Garithe Bipad*, Samaresh Basu, Ananda Publishers, 1989.
- Runner*, Santipriyo Bandopadhyay, Vostok, 79, Mahatma Gandhi Rd., Calcutta - 9, 1991.
- Pikur Diary O Ananya*, Satyajit Ray, Ananda Publishers, 1992.
- Balu Gachen Ram Sanna*, Sayid Mustafa Siraj, Ananda Publishers.
- Chotoder Sresta Galpa* (Collection of Stories), Edited by Lila Majumdar & Premendra Mitra Mody Publishing House.
- Kakahigarh Abhijan*, Sastipada Chattopadhyay, Ujjal Sahitya Mandir, C-3 College Street Market, Calcutta, 1989 (2nd reprint).
- Kankaboti*, Lila Majumdar, P.Ray, Ray and Associates, 2, Gurupada Choudhury Lane, Calcutta - 6, 1986.
- Nana Ranger Galpa*, Swapan Budo, India Associated Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd. M.G. Rd., Calcutta - 7, 1993.
- Tumpa Name Meyeti*, Priyoranjan Moitra, Nandita Publishers.
- Ora Kara*, Sachindranath Basu, Sishu Sahitya Parishad Prakashan, 8/4 A, Panditya Rd., Calcutta - 29.
- Naba Patrika*, A collection of stories published by Deb Sahitya Kutir.
- Chitra Thaba*, Manjul Sen, New Bengal Press, 68, College St., Calcutta - 73, 1993.
- Sikhor Rahasya*, Nalini Das, Sandesh Festival Number, 1992.
- Mandur Rupmati*, Buddhadeb Guha, A.Mukherji & Co. Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta - 73, 1985.
- Jarman Steeler Chabi*, Apurba Dutta, Ananda Bazar Patrika Ltd. for Ananda Mela.
- Samparka*, Amal Kanti Gosh in Ananda Mela, Ananda Bazar Group of Papers, 1993.
- Manhatene Manhunt*, Sujon Dasgupta, Ananda Publishers, 1993.
- Ek Thappara Ek Jhak*, Ashapurna Devi, Ananda Bazar Group of Papers, 1993.
- Anand Sadan*, Lila Majumdar, Ananda Mela, 1993.
- Pandav Goenda*, Sashtipada Chattopadhyay, Ananda Mela, 1993.
- Misor Rahasya*, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Ananda Publishers, 1991 (second edition).

- Hitam Garer Guptadhan*, Sirsendu Mukhopadhyay, Ananda Publishers, 1990 (fifth edition).
- Ghoda Jay*, Gouri Dharm Pal, Ananda Publishers, 1980.
- Hoire Babui Hoi*, Ananda Shankar Ray, Ananda Publishers, 1988 (5th edition).
- Falgur Galpa*, Mahasweta Debi, Sandesh, 1992.
- Brajo Buro*, Satyajit Ray, Sandesh, 1992.
- Feluda plus Feluda*, Satyajit Ray, Ananda Publishers, 1992.
- Samay Burima*, Gouri Dharmapal, Sandesh, 1992.
- Tharpor*, Sisir Kumar Majumdar, Sandesh, 1992.
- Siddharta Babur Bismriti*, Manjil Sen, Sandesh, 1992.
- Aparajito*, Santipriyo Bandopadhyay, Sandesh, 1992.
- Moyner Kalo Sona*, Manohar Basak, Sandesh, 1992.
- Santu O Ek Tukro Chand*, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Ananda Publishers, 1992.
- Karvalor Baksho*, Samaresh Majumdar, Ananda Publishers, 1992.
- Sibar Fire Asha*, Moti Nandi, Ananda Publishers, 1992.
- Professor Sanku*, Satyajit Ray, Ananda Publishers, 1992.
- Tinti Tamar Poysa*, Meera Balasubramaniam, Sishu Sahitya Sansad Pvt.Ltd., 1992.
- Kakubabu Samagra*, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Ananda Publishers, 1992.
- Ekta Maya Eka*, Kartick Ghosh, Punascha, 1993.
- Golokdar Computer Class*, Partha Pratim Sengupta, Ananda Publishers, 1993.

A writer's problem does not change. He himself changes and the world he lives in changes, but his problem remains the same. It is always how to write truly and having found what is true, to project it in such a way that it becomes a part of the experience of the person who reads it.

Ernest Hemingway